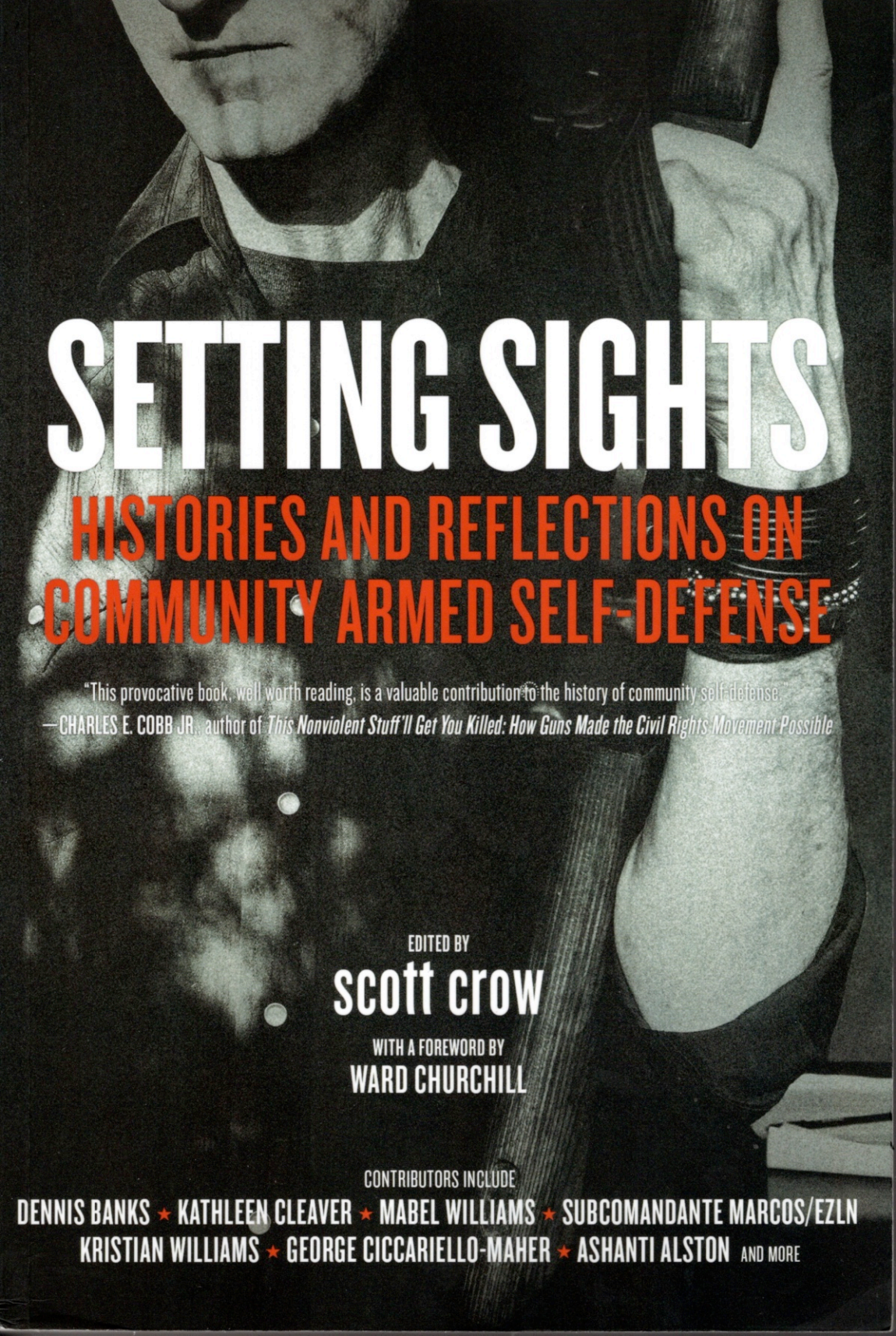
SETTING SIGHTS
HISTORIES AND REFLECTIONS ON COMMUNITY ARMED SELF-DEFENSE
"This provocative book, well worth reading, is a valuable contribution to the history of community self-defense."
—CHARLES E. COBB JR., author of *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*
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Drifting from the Mainstream: A Chronicle of Early Anti-rape Organizing and WASP

Nikki Craft

1972–1975

New information was surfacing within the women's movement about the myths surrounding rape. Women were beginning to discuss rape in feminist consciousness-raising groups. For the first time women could benefit from the experience and knowledge of other women. Susan Brownmiller's eloquent historical analysis in *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Diana Russell's *The Politics of Rape*, and Medea and Thompson's *Against Rape* laid the foundation for the changes that would sweep the country in the next decade.

Consciousness Raising

A small group of Dallas women left their consciousness-raising group[1] and began to organize specifically around the issue of rape. Each woman in the group, including myself, had been raped at one time in her life. Each was tired of talking about it and wanted to act. None of us were exactly sure of what to do. We began by educating ourselves. Part of that educational process was attending an anti-rape conference in Austin, Texas. It would change our lives.

Hundreds of women had come from across the country to convey their individual experiences about rape. We stood dumbfounded

as, one after another, women went before the microphone sharing all-too-similar accounts. Women spoke of their interactions with the police, with doctors, judges, juries, and lawyers. Repeatedly they encountered hostile, insensitive, and blatantly suspicious questioning by the agencies appointed to uphold the "law and order." They spoke of being double victims, first by their rapist, and then by a judicial system secure in its two hundred years of patriarchal justice. Many women found the aftermath of their rape to be more traumatic and painful than the rape itself. We began to see rape not as a sexual crime but as a political crime against women.

The experiences gained from psychological humiliation to horrifying accounts of brutal torture. Several women showed gashes from knife wounds and scars from gunshots. As the hours wore on it became apparent that the scars pierced deeper than our flesh.

One woman cried for fifteen minutes before the microphone as other women held and comforted her. Finally she managed to calmly state, "During the whole rape I wondered: How can this man hate me so much without even knowing who I am? I am afraid of all men now. I am afraid to walk the streets. I am afraid to be alone in my apartment. I am afraid to be."

There were many tears that weekend, and then our tears turned to rage. There would be no more years of silent anger, guilt, anguish, and fear; no more acceptance that this is the way it must be. No longer would we exist in isolated cages being forced to deal with rape unprepared until the moment of crisis. There would be no more willing victims. There would be no turning back for us. "*We must fight together or be attacked alone*" became our battle cry. We knew our only alternative was for all women to join in a common defense against male terrorism.

We were living in a state of siege, moving about in a war zone. Though no official declaration had been signed, statistics proved we were open to attack on all fronts: in our bedrooms, our cars, at bus stops, in our marriages, alleyways, in elevators. The wartime curfew had been set. Women were to be off the streets at sunset.

So much was still to be done. We realized that women must work at every level. We needed new laws. We needed new attitudes about sexuality. We needed the most fundamental changes in our culture. At the time however, the most crucial need was to open our communication

with other victims of rape. Our group established a brief alliance with the newly formed Dallas Women Against Rape (DWAR). Their goal as a volunteer agency was to provide counseling and support for victims of sexual violence.

Working within the System

The phones began to ring; one woman after another called in. There were women who needed protection from their husbands because the police would not intervene; and women who needed companionship as they went through the ordeal at the hospital. There were those who needed to talk about rapes that had happened years before and others who had been raped only hours before. One woman called *minutes* after a rapist had left her house. She did not want to go to the police but only wanted to go to a place where she could feel safe. (Dear God, I thought, there is nowhere for us to be really safe. But I did not tell her that.)

There was a seminar held with the Dallas Police Department, an effort to sensitize the police officers and change their methods of dealing with rape victims. The officers surely learned something, but I am sure we must have learned more. We discovered how little progress the anti-rape movement had made. Our optimistic enthusiasm dwindled with the realization that we had underestimated the task before us. This would be a movement years in the making; a lifetime commitment.

We began to wonder how long we could continue counseling women who had been victims of male rage. We were exhausting ourselves doing what women have traditionally done, volunteering our time, our energy, and our lives to apply band-aids to a system that required major reconstructive surgery.

There were weekly meetings that drained our energy. There were personality conflicts and trivial infighting over issues which blinded us from seeing our committed goal. And as always there were financial strains. Where would we get our money? From individuals? From foundations? Or would we be co-opted into a county-run, county-funded, nonpolitical social service agency? The more establishment-oriented faction of DWAR began to hint that being too vocal in our criticism of the police might hamper our ability to get funding. This began the first rumblings of what was to end in a major split within DWAR.

Women Armed for Self-Protection shooting practice outside of Dallas, Texas, 1975. Credit: Nikki Craft.

Falling from Grace

We were young and naive. We were primarily politically oriented and made better activists than counselors, but we were learning. Several of us had never worked within a group and it was difficult for all involved. We were dogmatic and arrogant. We had no patience; the task ahead was too awesome and urgent. We were overflowing with anger, and

DWAR no longer met our needs. In retrospect, the group was probably relieved when we packed up one evening and left their organization.

A Walk on the Wild Side

Suddenly we were individuals; six women, free to move, unhampered by the burdensome group process that existed at DWAR. We were excited. We were as angry as we could have been and survived it. We contemplated retaliation. There are some violent offenders who do not realize how close they did come to dying.

We had all-night brainstorming sessions. Our plan was to seek out less traditional avenues of expression where we would perhaps work more effectively. The sky was the limit. In a world where we saw no justice, it was no longer useful to restrict our work to the confines of the law. We were infiltrated by the police. Our phones were tapped, our houses invaded, and a few threats were made against our lives.

Our split from DWAR; our impatience and anger, the realizations we had come to, separated and isolated us from many of Dallas's liberal and academic women, who exerted lots of control over the larger women's movements.

The more isolated we were, the more radical we became. We sensed our own power. We began learning to use guns. We fantasized and even planned how to accomplish actual justice against men who violently abused women with impunity and tacit protection from the police, law enforcement, and the courts. At that time no sex offenders were even identified, and in the court it was most often women put on trial instead of the perpetrator. When it came to rape, in the '70s discussions of "rights" and protections were reserved for violent offenders, not so for victims. It was infuriating. We became WASP—Women Armed for Self-Protection—and we were willing to kill rapists before they killed us.

Our first leaflet ended:

> WE ARE WOMEN . . . WE ARE ARMED. WE REPEAT . . . WE ARE WASP.
> WE ARE PREPARED TO STING.
> WE SUPPORT IMMEDIATE AND DRASTIC RETALIATION AGAINST ALL RAPISTS.

In Texas the right to bear arms is not only a constitutional one, but it's a God-given one. This applies to everyone except blacks and

women. The authorities were none too pleased to have angry feminists advising women to arm themselves. Many women already had guns—we advised them to learn how to use them. "Women must perceive themselves as being worth defending. In a life threatening situation there must be no hesitation to pull the trigger," read our statement of purpose. Police intelligence officers began paying "friendly" visits to our instructors and friends, our phones were tapped. Paranoia set in. Were there infiltrators among us?[2] We drifted even further from the mainstream.

Posters appeared in Dallas reading, "*Men and women were created equal . . . and Smith & Wesson makes damn sure it stays that way.*" A woman was depicted in a militant stance with rifle resting across her chest. Graffiti appeared on the side of a building at a busy intersection reading, "*Women—castrate your rapist—let him know women don't enjoy being raped.*"

We urged lawyers to refuse to defend rapists as an expression of solidarity with women. We publicly praised women who had killed rapists in self-defense or even after the fact, as in the case of Inez García.

Amid much criticism we began getting letters of support from women across the country. Many women were ready for defiance. They wanted to channel their anger and were ready to hear what we had to say, even if it was rhetorical and rigid. Four women came from Chicago to meet with us, share ideas, and discuss strategy. National communication became important. A network began that would be used in actions over the next seven years.

In the end of 1974, in addition to arms training we began observing at rape trials. During these trials another important coalition was formed. We brought reporters and journalists into the courtrooms. This resulted in local and national publicity.

Fear and Loathing in America's Courts

We always knew the judicial system and media would not protect women. We would have to do it ourselves. In addition to arms training and media outreach, we produced ten thousand leaflets targeting in particular a brutal rapist who had walked free while the survivor suffered. We included his address, place of employment, facts of the trial, side and frontal photographs of him that we had secretly taken

outside the courtroom, and educational statements about rape and our society. The leaflet was headed, "*This leaflet is not an accusation of guilt. It is a warning to all women of a possible threat to their safety.*"

We worked diligently to make the leaflets accurate. We felt it our personal responsibility for legal as well as moral reasons. We leafleted his neighborhood and place of employment. We discovered that his employer knew nothing of the charges or the trial. Within the week he was fired from the job he had held for over ten years.[3]

Burning Old Newspapers

This was WASP's last action, then we disbanded. We were badly in need of rest. We isolated ourselves due to a long combination of factors; emotional hurt, police infiltration, fear of retaliation from rapists, all combined with burnout, had made us painfully rigid to ourselves and others. Inflexibility was making us unable to see new, more creative approaches.

Our goal had never been to build an institution. When WASP ceased to meet our needs, we dissolved the group as fast as we had created it.

We moved into a period of inactivity—a time for reflection. We took with us the experiences that will last for lifetimes and skills that would be invaluable in future work. We took with us feelings of power, accomplishment, and pride that made us each stronger. We have even given other women a bit of that strength and excitement. I see it glimmering in their eyes, as we sit, years later, talking of those times over coffee, burning wood and old newspapers.

Notes

This is edited from a longer essay originally written circa 1979 about Women Armed for Self-Protection (WASP), cofounded and organized by Nikki Craft and other women in the early 1970s in Dallas, Texas. Nikki Craft, "Drifting from the Mainstream: A Chronicle of Early Anti-Rape Organizing," http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/Porn/WASP1.html, accessed June 28, 2017.

1 Consciousness-raising is a form of activism popularized by U.S. feminists in the late 1960s and early '70s. A group of people focus attention on some cause or condition and personally discuss it from different perspectives.

2 WASP was infiltrated and under intense surveillance by the Dallas Police Dept. Their most provocative poster was put together by one of the informants.

3 The success of this action eventually led to the Kitty Genovese Women's Project, a group of women who posed as sociology students under the pretense of doing "statistical study on violent crimes" and compiled, precomputer, the names of every indicted sex offender in Dallas County from 1960 to 1976. A year later the Kitty Genovese Women's Project distributed throughout Dallas over twenty thousand copies of a newspaper that contained news articles, personal accounts of rape, and the list of over 2,100 men indicted for sex-related offenses over the sixteen-year period. "Exposing the Rapist Next Door," *Seven Days*, April 25, 1977, http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/Porn/KGWP1.html, accessed June 28, 2017.